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ABSTRACT

For decades, educators have been concerned with the problem of truancy. Accordingly, this report focuses on an absentee improvement program at a rural, lower-middle class, predominantly white elementary school with 722 students that had a history of high truancy, as verified by teachers, the administration, the school counselor, staff, and parents. A program was developed which relied on positive reinforcement as well as counseling over a 10-week period to improve the school attendance rate of a select group of 14 students identified as chronic absentees. These students were informed that they were expected to attend school each day, and in return they would be rewarded and reinforced for consistent attendance by a "special time awards day" every Friday, consisting of special activities such as ice cream parties after lunch, pizza, a lakefront picnic, a swim party, etc. Results of the implementation, reported in detail, indicate that the program was effective in decreasing the number of absences for the target group, that all of the subjects demonstrated a more positive attitude toward themselves and school, and that grades improved as well as attendance. A bibliography is included. (TE)

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THE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF AN ABSENTEE IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

by

Robert K. Callahan

A Practicum Report

Submitted to the faculty of the Center for the Advancement of Education of Nova University in the partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science.

CG 022750

June 1986

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ABSTRACT

The Development and Implementation of an Absentee Improvement Program

Callahan, Robert K. June 1986: Practicum Report, Nova University, Center for the Advancement of Education

For decades, educators have been concerned with the problem of truancy. This report focuses on an absentee improvement program at an elementary school. It is a rural, lower-middle class, predominantly white school with 722 students.

The researcher of this report was asked by the school principal to establish a program which might aid in decreasing absenteeism. The researcher was responsible for coordinating the selection of student placement and treatment, collection of research data and reporting the results to the principal.

The effectiveness of the treatment is based on the improved absentee records of the targeted group. Implementation of this program did increase the average daily attendance of the student, thereby increasing the likelihood of the student's success in school.

I hereby testify that this paper and the work it reports are entirely my own. Where it has been necessary to draw from the work of others, published or unpublished, I have acknowledged such work in accordance with accepted scholarly and editorial practice. I give this testimony freely, out of respect for the scholarship of other workers in the field and in the hope that my own work, presented here, will earn similar respect.

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Practicum Title The Development and Implementation of an Absentee Improvement Program

Student's Name Robert K. Callahan

Program Site Orlando Date 27 June 1986

Observer's Name Jim DiGiacomo
(please print ---------- and sign)

Observer's position Principal

Observer's comment on impact of the project (handwritten):

This program was implemented over a 10 week period at Ross Jefferies. During the duration of the program the absentee rate among students was cut by at most or 50% and more in other cases.

v

CHAPTER I

PURPOSE

BACKGROUND

This practicum was conducted in a public elementary school located in a small-town community in Central Florida. The geographic area of the school district covers approximately 1,467 square miles. The school population includes kindergarten through fifth grades. The enrollment of the target school was 722 students. One administrator, one guidance counselor, one curriculum resource teacher (CRT), 25 regular classroom teachers, 14 classroom aides, 9 special area teachers and 9 other aides and secretaries were available to support the students.

The community is predominantly a rural one, and a 1982-83 SAC's report indicated that most of the employment is provided through tourism, fishing, ranch work, farming and construction. The report further supported evidence that parents tend to discourage school attendance for many boys and girls. The community is transient. Only 35% of the student population has been enrolled in the school for three years or more. Approximately 25% of the student body withdraws during a given school year (SAC's 82-83).

The economic background is mostly lower-middle class to lower class. Twenty-six percent of the school population is on free lunch, and 6% received reduced lunch benefits.

Seventy-five of the students are transported on a bus for approximately one hour each way in order to attend school.

Ninety-five percent of the population is Caucasian, 2% Black, and 3% Hispanic. The majority of the parents have only a high school education, with 20% having a college education. Forty percent of the students come from homes with divorced parents.

All teachers are state certified, and teachers participate in ongoing in-service programs. Fifteen of the teachers hold Masters Degrees. There are two male teachers and 32 female teachers.

The writer of this practicum is a male physical education teacher who is responsible for physical education instruction for half of the target school's population, kindergarten through 5th grades. The author is also responsible for school-wide field trips, safety patrols, back-up discipline and public relations in the community. The administration of the target school requested the writer to assist in improving attendance.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The target school had a history of high truancy as verified by teachers, the administration, the school counselor, staff and parents. Further, it was the belief of the target personnel that the effects of the school, both academic and social, were minimized as a result of

this high truancy. (SAC's 82-83)

The problem of absenteeism was greatest among fourth and fifth grade students. The students in this study averaged at least 1.8 absences per week as identified by school attendance records and verified by the school principal. The range varied from 2.7 days per week to 1.2 days per week. The students with a high absenteeism rate also had below average grades and felt negatively about themselves and school. This was verified by the classroom teachers, guidance counselor and principal. When the students were in school, they averaged 2.1 discipline referrals per week as verified by the principal's discipline records. The severity of the problem among fourth and fifth grade students was also demonstrated by teacher surveys which indicated such. (See Appendix A)

Earlier studies indicate that truancy or high absenteeism leads to dropping out of school, becoming drug or alcohol abusers, engaging in criminal behavior or experiencing other psychological difficulities.

It was also indicated that the attendance habits students develop while in elementary school will carry over into their lives and careers. (Nielsen and Gerber, 1979) William G. Tapply's article titled "What To Do When Your Teen Wants To Quit School" (Better Homes and Gardens, June 1985) emphasized that two-thirds of the students who dropped out of high school could be identified as risks as early as

seventh grade, according to a study he conducted in one school district. One of the main warning signs was frequent absence.

The principal in the target school, during an interview with the researcher, also related that in his experience students who exhibited chronic absenteeism did not take full advantage of the educational offerings. He also expressed a desire to establish a program to improve this situation.

OUTCOME STATEMENTS

The purpose of this study was to decrease the absenteeism of the target group. Over a period of ten weeks, each participant has decreased his/her absenteeism by an average of at least one day per week, as verified by the official school attendance records before and after implementation of the practicum. (See Appendix G)

The students in the target group have also demonstrated a more positive attitude toward themselves and attending school, as measured by pre-surveys and post-surveys completed by the target group's classroom teachers. (See Appendixes B and D)

CHAPTER II

RESEARCH

The problem of what to do about students who are habitually absent from school has been debated for a long time. In today's fast-paced world, it is often difficult for parents to keep track of their children. This is especially true of families where both parents work or single-parent families. Some parents will allow a child to miss school for almost any reason the child can imagine. Finally, there are a few parents who don't care whether their children attend school because they had bad experiences when they were in school and do not see the need for a good education. This type of parental attitude causes the child to be absent frequently. Instruction is missed, assignments are not completed, and a lower rate of success is achieved by the student. The teacher's job becomes more difficult in an attempt to compensate for instruction missed and to see that assignments are completed. Also, elementary teachers and principals must not lose sight of the fact that attendance habits formed by students in elementary school will carry over into their lives and business careers. (Sharp, 1984)

A comprehensive report by the Children's Defense Fund (1974) documented the widespread nature of the problem of habitual absenteeism for the public schools. The report

consisted of data from over 6,500 families in nine states. An analysis of the data indicated that students from every racial group and income level may be habitually absent from school. However, certain common factors appear that form a pattern. These common factors are rural communities, low income and unemployed households, families with little education, and minorities. The Children's Defense Fund (1974) report emphasized that the 1970 census data, that indicated over 750,000 elementary children were not in school, was probably an under-estimation of the problem. Many children who attend school irregularly may not be included in the census data. (Barber and Kagey, 1977) This report points out the enormous problem that exists with chronic absenteeism in the United States.

A study done by (Nielsen and Gerber, 1979) indicates that the student who is habitually absent from school is as likely to be a boy as it is a girl, although boys usually start at an earlier grade. Almost half of the students studied were older than their classmates because they had repeated a grade. Of the thirty-three students identified as having attendance problems and interviewed, four had attempted suicide. These students often do not have adult role models or any adult that they can turn to for help, whether it be for school work or societal problems. Also, seventy-five percent of these students had a problem with their teachers which they thought could not be resolved.

This information was reported in the above mentioned study.

Often the students with attendance problems become involved in criminal activities and/or drug usage. In a 1981 study done by the Los Angeles Police Department and reported by Gordon Morris in the NEA Journal, over a four-day period, 174 juveniles were apprehended for truancy violations and then turned over to school officials. The resultant drop in daytime crime was amazing. Daytime burglaries and auto thefts both dropped thirty percent, and daytime thefts from autos dropped seventy-five percent from the previous seven day period. The survey performed by (Nielsen and Gerber, 1979) showed that eighty-four percent of the chronic absentees used cigarettes in some manner, seventy-one percent used alcohol, fifty-five percent used marijuana, twenty percent used amphetamines, and seventeen percent used LSD. The range of use varied from "tried" to "frequent use." These possible outcomes are enough of a reason to try to stop chronic absenteeism in the elementary school before these students get involved in dangerous activities.

What can be done to stop these activities and bring these students to school? Previous studies by Hall, Lund and Jackson (1968) and Barrish, Saunders and Wolf (1969) have demonstrated that students' behavior can be modified within the public school system to the desirable outcome. In these studies, the classroom teacher delivered either

social or tangible reinforcement for the appropriate behavior.

Studies done by Copeland, Brown, Alexrod and Hall (1970); Hall, Fox, Willard, Goldsmith, Emerson, Owen, Porcia and Davis (1971); and (Copeland, Brown and Hall, 1974) demonstrated that principals can increase the rate of student attendance by verbally reinforcing the parents for their children being in school. Another study illustrated that a principal can directly influence student attendance at school. Brown, Copeland, and Hall (1972) pointed this out very dramatically. When the principal in the study praised the targeted children for attending school, they came all the time. When the principal tried to fade away from the daily reinforcement, the children reverted to their original behavior. These students responded positively once the principal praised them for attending school on a daily basis.

Economic rewards were used in studies by Ayllon, Smith and Rogers (1970); Hensen (1970); and MacDonald, Gallimore, and MacDonald (1970) with similar success. A study by (Barber and Kagey, 1977) was designed so that children could earn an opportunity to attend part or all of a monthly party. The amount of party time was based on the number of days they came to school during that month. The party time varied from fifteen minutes to a full hour. Those students that were absent more than three days were sent to a special workroom where they were required to complete

academic assignments. The results of this study showed a drastic increase in attendance for the months in which the contingent party condition existed.

The study by (Copeland, Brown and Hall, 1974) used tokens as a reward for attending school all day, and the tokens could be exchanged for money at the end of each week. In this study, target students were asked to register at the principal's office every day they attended school. When they signed in, they were given five tokens. They were also asked to sign out at the end of the day and were given five tokens again. This was done because some children were registering and then leaving school. The problem with these two techniques is that the school has to spend money to keep these students in school. In some cases, this might lead to student resentment and some students might become attendance problems so they could also receive money.

In some states, including Florida, the school might gain financially by having more students in school. This is due to the fact that the school is paid by the state for its average daily attendance. If attendance is increased enough, the cost to the school for this monetary reward would be offset by the increase in monies from the state for an increase in the average daily attendance.

A study of truancy prevention by Unger, Douds and Pierce (1981) in Tucson, Arizona tried a different approach for chronic absenteeism. This program taught students the

skills necessary to succeed in school. When a student is identified as a chronic absentee, the skill deficiencies that cause the problems are diagnosed and corrective lessons are devised and begun. During the school year, teachers worked with forty youths and found that this program was able to decrease the amount of disruptive classroom behavior and class skipping while it increased the grade-point averages of the targeted students.

The uniqueness of this researcher's study was in its variety of reward opportunities for the student and the involvement by various members of the target school's staff. Also, the study was administered by a teacher at the request of the principal. At the end of each week, the target students who attended school all week were given the opportunity to be taken out of class for one hour for a special time awards day. The researcher, with the support of the target school's principal and staff, attempted to decrease absenteeism by this method.

CHAPTER 111

METHOD

SOLUTION STRATEGY

In reviewing the literature, it became quite clear that various strategies were tried in order to modify school attendance. This researcher implemented a strategy which met the needs of the target students and the school as a whole. The objective was to improve school attendance and, therefore, help the student.

The key to the success of such a strategy was in receiving commitment from the target students and had to have an invested interest. As a result, thet were able to identify a particular goal or payoff. It was improtant for the students to see that there was a benefit to improving their school attendance. (Nielsen and Gerber, 1979)

Providing positive reinforcement, as well as counseling, was the strategy of this particular researcher. The main objective was to increase school attendance. After the students were identified, the researcher met with the target group and explained the program. Basically, students were informed that they were expected to attend school each day, and in return they would be rewarded and reinforced for their attendance.

The researcher developed a program which provided positive consequences in order to improve attendance. As

a part of the program, the researcher met with the target students as a group on Mondays. He and/or other staff members also met with them individually on one or more other days of the week. Students earned the opportunity to participate in "special time awards day" on Fridays because they had attended school Monday through Thursday of that week.

In addition to special attention by school staff members, including the researcher, the special activities included the following: ice cream party after lunch, a trip to Burger King for lunch, pizza sent in for lunch, lakefront picnic, a swim party, field day helpers for grades K-2, field day helpers for grades 3-5, soft drink and junk food party after lunch, teachers aid for one day and student's choice of award activity.

Attendance records were kept by the researcher, as well as the principal's office to insure accuracy.

IMPLEMENTATION

This practicum was implemented from February 24 to May 12, 1986, using the following schedule:

February 21 Survey to all 4th and 5th grade teachers (Appendix A)

February 24 Pre-survey to all target student's teachers (Appendix B)
Initial meeting with selected target group. The program was explained in detail to subject group. The entire group met with me every Monday for an activity. Monday was also the time for guests to speak to the group, i.e.

	principal, guidance counselor, coaches, etc. Questionnaire to target students (Appendix C) Activity: volleyball
February 25, 26 27	Every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday the researcher met with individual students within the target group or had another staff member conference with individual students.
February 28	Every Friday the students within the target group met with the researcher for "special time awards day", if they were not absent during the week. Award: Ice cream day
March 3	Group meeting Activity: soccer
March 4,5,6	Individual student conferences
March 7	"Special Time Awards Day": Burger King Lunch
March 10	Group meeting Activity: kickball
March 11,12,13	Individual student conferences
March 14	"Special Time Awards Day": Pizza party
March 17	Group meeting Activity: softball
March 18,19,20	Individual student conferences
March 21	"Special Time Awards Day": Lakefront picnic
March 24	Group Meeting Activity: relay races
March 25,26	Individual student conferences (only Tuesday and Wednesday because of a teacher workday on Friday)
March 27	"Special Time Awards Day": Swim Party

April 7	Group meeting Activity: dodge ball
April 8, 9, 10	Individual student conferences
April 11	"Special Time Awards Day": Field Day helpers for grades K-2
April 14	Group meeting Activity: flag football
April 15, 16, 17	Individual student conferences
April 18	"Special Time Awards Day": Field Day helpers for grades 3-5
April 21	Group meeting Activity: jump rope contest
April 22, 23, 24	Individual student conferences
April 25	"Special Time Awards Day": Soft drink and junk food party after lunch
April 28	Group meeting Activity: tug of war and big ball competition
April 29, 30 May 1	Individual student conferences
May 2	"Special Time Awards Day": Teacher's aide for one day
May 5	Group meeting Activity: Students' choice
May 6,7,8	Individual student conferences
May 9	"Special Time Awards Day": Students' choice
May 12	Group meeting Post-survey to all target students' teachers (Appendix D) Post-survey to all target students (Appendix E)
May 15	Final report of the project

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This practicum evaluation was based on the total number of absences during the ten week implementation period as compared to the ten week period prior to implementation. During the implementation period, each student's absences decreased at least 58%. (See Appendix G) In addition, there was an increase of support from the administration, teachers and parents.

There was a total of fourteen subjects whose absences ranged from 12 days to 27 days for the ten week period prior to implementation. The total number of these absences was 257 days. This was an average of 1.8 absences per week per student. The absences during this period were verified by the researcher and principal as indicated by the official school attendance records.

The breakdown of absences for the individual subjects was as follows:

Subject	# Days Absent During 10 Weeks Prior to Implementation of Program
A	27
B	20
C	18
D	19
E	16
F	22
G	18
H	25
I	17
J	17
K	15
L	14
M	12
N	17

During the implementation period, there was a total of 39 absences for all fourteen subjects. This was an average of .28 of a day absence per student per week. Absences ranged from zero days to 8 days during the ten week program implementation period.

The breakdown for the individual subjects during implementation was as follows:

Subject	# Days Absent During the 10 Week Program Implementation Period
A	8
B	1
C	0
D	1
E	5
F	3
G	2
H	1
I	1
J	4
K	4
L	3
M	5
N	1

While the implementation period was only ten weeks and the total number of subjects was small, the results strongly indicate that the program was quite effective in decreasing the number of absences for the target group. The researcher had predicted that the subjects would decrease his/her absenteeism by an average of at least one day per week. This was the case for all subjects as verified by the official school attendance records and the researcher's attendance records.

Results of the post-surveys completed by the teachers also suggests that all of the subjects demonstrated a more positive attitude toward themselves and school. The surveys indicate that in all cases but one, grades improved, as well as attendance. In the one exception, the subject maintained previous grade status. (See Appendixes G,H,I)

A major goal of the target school is to improve academic success. By keeping students in school, it also increases the likelihood of improving academic success. This point was demonstrated by this researcher's work.

In summary, the study indicates that absenteeism can be decreased by rewarding students for attending school regularly. Elementary students tend to respond to individual, as well as group attention. As indicated by teacher surveys, it appears that academic success can improve, as well as attendance.

CHAPTER V

RECOMMENDATIONS

This practicum was evaluated at its conclusion with the recommendation from the principal and teachers to continue the program. They further recommended that the program be expanded to include more students who have problems with absenteeism. The program would last for the entire school year, 1986-1987. It was further recommended that if it is economically feasible, or if staff is available, other types of problems might be identified and handled in a similar fashion. It was suggested that parents be included in the reward system to lessen the economic burden for the school. By expanding the program to include more students and additional potential reinforcers, more students could possibly achieve greater academic success.

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APPENDIX A

TEACHER SURVEY

For the purpose of identifying students that might be placed in the target group, please identify any student in your class with one or more of the following characteristics.

1. Has family and or personal problems
2. Below average grades
3. Two years behind in reading or math skills
4. Is frequently absent from school
5. Is frequently tardy to class
6. Demonstrates a poor self image
7. Has been referred to the office for discipline problems more than once

_____

Student's Name

APPENDIX B

TEACHER SURVEY

Please complete the following pre-survey by circling the appropriate response that best describes the student.

STUDENT'S NAME_____

1. Student attends class.

   always often sometimes seldom never

2. Student is on time to class.

   always often sometimes seldom never

3. Student is a behavioral problem.

   always often sometimes seldom never

4. Student completes class assignments.

   always often sometimes seldom never

5. Student's attitude toward school is positive.

   always often sometimes seldom never

6. Student's attitude toward self is positive.

   always often sometimes seldom never

7. Student is willing to participate in classroom activities.

   always often sometimes seldom never

8. Students interacts with peers in a positive manner.

   always often sometimes seldom never

APPENDIX C

STUDENT'S PRE-SURVEY

Like Me	Unlike Me	
----	----	I don't like to talk in front of class.
----	----	Most of the children my age like to play with me.
----	----	I don't get along with my parents at home.
----	----	I think I am a pretty good looking person.
----	----	If I decide to do something special, other kids usually like to do it with me.
----	----	I think I am as happy as the next guy.
----	----	I don't think my teachers like me much.
----	----	School is a fun place to be most of the time.
----	----	I'm happy when I get to play by myself.
----	----	I could do better in school if I wanted.
----	----	I would rather be a follower than a leader.
----	----	There are one or two teachers I like best.
----	----	I usually feel pretty good after a day at school.
----	----	I think I have a pretty good life.
----	----	When I get up in the morning, I worry about going to school.
----	----	There are a few things I don't like about school.
----	----	I feel very positive about my school work.
----	----	Most of the time people have to show me how to do every little thing.

APPENDIX D

TEACHERS SURVEY

Please complete the following post-survey by circling the appropriate response that best describes the student.

STUDENT'S NAME_____

1. Student attends class.

   always often sometimes seldom never

2. Student is on time to class.

   always often sometimes seldom never

3. Student is a behavioral problem.

   always often sometimes seldom never

4. Student completes class assignments.

   always often sometimes seldom never

5. Student's attitude toward school is positive.

   always often sometimes seldom never

6. Student's attitude toward self is positive.

   always often sometimes seldom never

7. Student is willing to participate in classroom activities.

   always often sometimes seldom never

8. Student interacts with peers in a positive manner.

   always often sometimes seldom never

APPENDIX E

STUDENT'S POST-SURVEY

Like Me	Unlike Me	
----	----	Most of the time people have to show me how to do every little thing.
----	----	I feel very positive about my school life.
----	----	There are a few things I don't like about going to school.
----	----	When I get up in the morning, I worry about going to school.
----	----	I think I have a pretty good life.
----	----	I usually feel pretty good after a day at school.
----	----	There are one or two teachers I like best.
----	----	I would rather be a follower than a leader.
----	----	I could do better in school if I wanted.
----	----	I'm happy when I get to play by myself.
----	----	School is a fun place to be most of the time.
----	----	I don't think my teachers like me much.
----	----	I think I am as happy as the next guy.
----	----	If I decide to do something special, other kids usually like to do it with me.
----	----	I think I'm a pretty good looking person.
----	----	I don't get along with my parents at home.
----	----	Most of the children my age like to play with me.
----	----	I don't like to talk in front of class.

APPENDIX F

ADMINISTRATIVE, SUPPORT PERSONNEL AND TEACHER SURVEY

ABSENTEEISM IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

Please give your input as to how this program could be improved to be more effective in the future:

_____

_____

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NAME

APPENDIX G

Target Subjects	Number of absences During 10 Weeks Before Implementation of Program	Number of Absences During 10 Weeks of Program Implementation	Percent Absences Decreased
Subject A	27	8	66%
Subject B	20	1	95%
Subject C	18	0	100%
Subject D	19	1	95%
Subject E	16	5	69%
Subject F	22	3	86%
Subject G	18	2	89%
Subject H	25	1	96%
Subject I	17	1	94%
Subject J	17	4	76%
Subject K	15	4	73%
Subject L	14	3	79%
Subject M	12	5	58%
Subject N	17	1	94%

APPENDIX H

TEACHER PRE-SURVEY RESULTS

1. Student attends class.

always	often	sometimes	seldom	never
		13	1	

2. Student is on time to class.

always	often	sometimes	seldom	never
6	6	1	1	

3. Student is a behavioral problem.

always	often	sometimes	seldom	never
1	7	4	1	1

4. Student completes class assignments.

always	often	sometimes	seldom	never
4	5	4	1	

5. Student's attitude towards school is positive.

always	often	sometimes	seldom	never
2	2	8	2	

6. Student's attitude towards self is positive.

always	often	sometimes	seldom	never
1	5	5	3	

7. Student is willing to participate in classroom activities.

always	often	sometimes	seldom	never
3	6	4	1	

8. Student interacts with peers in a positive manner.

always	often	sometimes	seldom	never
3	6	4	1	

A total of fourteen subject students were included in this program.

APPENDIX I

TEACHER POST-SURVEY RESULTS

1. Student attends class.

always	often	sometimes	seldom	never
1	12	1		

2. Student is on time to class.

always	often	sometimes	seldom	never
10	3	1		

3. Student is a behavioral problem.

always	often	sometimes	seldom	never
	4	6	2	2

4. Student completes class assignments.

always	often	sometimes	seldom	never
7	4	2	1	

5. Student's attitude toward school is positive.

always	often	sometimes	seldom	never
4	6	4		

6. Student's attitude towards self is positive.

always	often	sometimes	seldom	never
3	6	5		

7. Student is willing to participate in classroom activities.

always	often	sometimes	seldom	never
5	8	1		

8. Student interacts with peers in a positive manner.

always	often	sometimes	seldom	never
4	8	1	1	

A total of fourteen subject students were included in this program.